

## **Commencement Address**

**Dr. Herb Asher**

**March 15, 1996**

**President Gee, our honored graduates, friends and families:**

**There is a saying in show business that one never wants to be the performer who follows an act with animals or children in it. In higher education, one never wants to be the commencement speaker who has to follow Gordon Gee. Gordon, thank you for that very generous and gracious introduction. In particular, your mention that I'm a Michigan graduate makes me feel really comfortable in delivering this commencement address. Perhaps I'll be able to return the favor some day by introducing you to a Cleveland audience as Art Modell's closest friend and confidant.**

**In reality, I'll always be thankful for my Michigan degree for it allowed me to move up in the world and get a job at one of America's leading**

universities—The Ohio State University. But I do need to tell you one Michigan story.

My last year at Michigan was the 1969-1970 academic year. The 1969 OSU-Michigan football game was in Ann Arbor. The Ohio State team came up to Ann Arbor undefeated and ranked number one in the country and was the defending national champion. Michigan upset Ohio State 24-12 and I was among the thousands of delirious Michigan fans singing “Goodbye Ohio State, Goodbye Woody.”

I had gone to the game with a friend who had gone to high school with Jim Stillwagon, one of Ohio State’s star players. She wanted to see Stillwagon after the game so we waited outside the stadium for the Ohio State players to come out of the locker room. I was very uncomfortable being there for as the Buckeye players came out, Michigan fans in the area taunted and mocked them.

I was standing right in front of the first bus that was going to take the Ohio State team back to Columbus. I looked up and saw this older man coming toward me wearing a black cap with an O on it. I realized it was

Woody Hayes and I was standing in his path. As Coach Hayes approached me, he must have assumed I was a distraught Ohio State fan because he shook my hand and said to me "Don't worry son. We'll get them next year." And I, who just minutes ago had been wildly cheering for Michigan, replied, "I know we will coach."

What I did not know at the time was that the next year I would be teaching at Ohio State. Three months after the game, I got a call from the political science department inviting me to come down to Columbus for a job interview. I already had a job offer from Duke University, but thank goodness I went to Columbus for the interview. For I discovered then that the Ohio State political science department was among the best in the country and still is today.

And so the following fall I sat in Ohio Stadium watching Buckeye football. Both Ohio State and Michigan were undefeated going into the last game. And just as Woody had promised me the year before, Ohio State won the game. The only problem was--I was still rooting for Michigan despite the fact that Ohio taxpayers and student tuition were

paying my salary. In fact, it took ten years for me to become an Ohio State fan in the OSU-Michigan game.

But I had been a fan of Ohio State academics all of my life. I was born and raised in New Jersey, one of a number of eastern states that did not have a very well developed system of public higher education. And so many easterners went West for college—to places like Ohio State and Indiana and Illinois and other Big Ten institutions. Thus when I was growing up in New Jersey, I already knew of friends and neighbors and relatives who had gotten their undergraduate, graduate or professional degrees at Ohio State. And I knew then that any institution that could produce such outstanding graduates must be one of America's leading universities. When you leave here today you will be joining some very distinguished company—the thousands of Ohio State alumni who are making a difference in the lives of their communities, their country and their fellow citizens. And your future accomplishments will add to this distinction.



**The world you will be entering is a very volatile, exciting and scary place. In the past year we have witnessed some shocking events. At home we were stunned by the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the murder of almost 200 Americans just 11 months ago. And our horror became greater when we learned that the people accused of this evil act were not international terrorists, but our fellow citizens. And who would have thought that our commencement speaker last June, then Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, would today be the Israeli Prime Minister because of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by one of his countrymen. And in Bosnia, more than 50 years after the end of World War II and the Nazi Holocaust, we learned that ethnic cleansing and mass slaughter still occur.**

**Bosnia also reminds us how seemingly remote parts of the world can affect us here in Ohio and at Ohio State. I think we all took some pride that the Bosnian peace accords were negotiated at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and throughout the world were called the Dayton accords. Here at Ohio State we were proud that one of our faculty members, political science professor Joe Kruzal, on leave with the U.S. State**

Department, was one of the architects of the peace negotiations. Our pride turned to sorrow when Joe was one of the three American diplomats to die in a tragic accident in Bosnia. And our sadness deepened when Sgt. Donald Dugan of Ridgeway, Ohio became the first American soldier to die in Bosnia.

The pace of change in all spheres of life is incredible. One of the few pieces of advice I'll give you today is to avoid the phrase "NOT IN MY LIFETIME" as in the breakup of the Soviet Union—NOT IN MY LIFETIME. Black majority rule and the demise of apartheid in South Africa—NOT IN MY LIFETIME. Peace treaties between Israel and some of her neighbors—NOT IN MY LIFETIME. The Berlin Wall torn down and the reunification of Germany—NOT IN MY LIFETIME. The Cleveland Indians in the World Series—NOT IN MY LIFETIME. And Northwestern in the Rose Bowl—DEFINITELY NOT IN MY LIFETIME.

The world of work and careers that you will be entering has become more challenging and even frightening. It used to be an article of faith in this country that if you took care and did your job well, your job would take care of you. The notion of job security and lifetime careers with the same company has almost vanished with all the downsizing and restructuring that has occurred in American industry.

Likewise, the pace of technological change is overwhelming. As I agonized over which personal computer to purchase, the choices went from 286 to 386 to 486 to Pentium, from 25 megahertz to 166 megahertz, from hard drives measured in megabytes to hard drives measured in gigabytes, and from single speed CD-ROMs to eight speed CD-ROMs. And I don't know what any of these terms really means. And my music collection has gone from 78s and 45s to LPs to 8 track to cassettes and compact discs. And now that I've pretty much switched over to compact discs, I've learned that something new is on the horizon—digital audio tape.



**In the world of politics, my area of professional expertise, there have been profound changes. Americans today are more cynical and distrustful of politicians and government than ever before. Our political campaigns have become increasingly negative and public discourse and debate increasingly strident and harsh. Why has this occurred?**

**Certain part of the blame rests with politicians, public officials, and political parties who fail to address the issues of concern to Americans, who wage campaigns that rely upon sound bites and attacks, and who occasionally violate the public trust.**

**But let's not put all the blame on the politicians. What about the media? Their coverage of politics is often shallow, treating politics and government as if it were a sporting event, a horse race, focusing on who's ahead, who's behind, who's gaining and who's losing rather than on substantive policy concerns. Candidates who speak in sound bites get rewarded by the media with news coverage. The tone of media coverage has become more negative and cynical with the result that public officials and political institutions are often treated as guilty until proven innocent. Unfortunately, in both the print and electronic media, the**



**dividing line between the respectable media and the tabloid media is blurring in favor of the National Enquirer approach to politics.**

**And what about we, the people? Do we share some of the blame? We are the best educated generation in the history of the United States, yet we are often woefully ignorant about public affairs, despite the many sources of information that are available to us. When it comes to politics, we're often too lazy and too disinterested to become informed on the issues of the day. As citizens, too often we emphasize our rights and ignore our responsibilities. We stress our entitlements, but ignore our obligations. The responsibilities of citizenship go far beyond voting in elections, paying one's taxes and obeying the laws.**

**We also need to become better informed about key issues so that we can avoid succumbing to simplistic solutions to complex problems. As we restructure government and shift more responsibilities from the federal government to state and local governments, volunteer activities through civic, social and religious organizations will become even more important in helping the less fortunate among us. In this graduating class are many students who served as volunteer tutors for children in our local**

**schools, who helped build houses for Habitat for Humanity, who donated time to homeless shelters, who participated in blood drives and countless other activities. And there are many students in this graduating class who enhanced political life on campus through their participation in clubs, organizations and student governments.**

**As citizens, we also have a responsibility to speak up, to engage our moral compass, in a constructive and civil fashion. Two centuries ago, Edmund Burke wrote “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men [and women] to do nothing.” Apartheid was such an evil. Today’s honorary degree recipient, Reverend Leon Sullivan, and thousands of other good men and women spoke up and today that evil has been ended. You must not let the voices of hatred and bigotry drown out the voices of the vast majority of good citizens.**

**It is clear that you will be entering a challenging world. I hope that your Ohio State education helps you make sense of this world. The analysis and communication skills that you have acquired and honed—no matter your major field of study—have become even more critical in coping with change. I hope we at Ohio State have done more than simply**

prepare you for your first job. For most of you, your first job will not be your last job. I hope that we have also prepared you for a lifetime of learning, of adaptation, of inquiry.

As you cope with the personal and professional and civic challenges that will face you, you will need in addition to your Ohio State education a sense of humor. Humor is everywhere. It's on student T shirts—beer, it's not just for breakfast anymore. On bumper stickers—I break for all animals—except Wolverines. On Tombstones—I told them I was sick. In political cartoons that combine politics and popular culture. One cartoon has Speaker Newt Gingrich saying to his father, “I love you man.” And his father responds, “Newt, you're not getting my Medicare. A similar cartoon has President Clinton talking to his brother Roger saying, “I love you man.” And Roger responds, “Bill, you're not getting my vote.”

There is even humor, some of it unintentional, in student term papers. In my campaign politics course, students have to work on a campaign and write a paper about their experience. One student who worked for a victorious candidate wrote in her paper that her candidate was a big



**sinner on Election Day. I think she meant winner. Another student worked for the candidate challenging the incumbent county prosecutor. The only problem was the student referred to the incumbent as the county persecutor. I always wondered whether this was a typo or a reflection of some legal problems the student had had. These two examples demonstrate that technology such as Spellcheck cannot save you from all of your mistakes.**

**Today is a day of great joy and celebration and accomplishment for you. Yet there is probably a twinge of sadness as you say goodbye to old friends and follow different roads and life paths. As Thomas Jefferson once wrote: "Let us not be uneasy about the different roads we may pursue. Let us be happy in the hope that by these different paths we may all meet in the end."**

**And so as we're just a few days from the start of spring, a time of hope and renewal, and just a few weeks from the holidays of Easter and Passover, celebrations of rebirth and freedom, let me wish you a life of joy, renewal, peace and freedom, and share with you, two days before Saint Patrick's day, an old Irish blessing:**

**May the road rise to meet you.**

**May the wind be always at your back**

**May the sun shine warm upon your face,**

**the rains fall soft upon your fields**

**and until we meet again**

**May God hold you in the palm of his hand.**

**Congratulations, best wishes, and GO BUCKS.**